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Squeezed on All Sides, Parents Forgo Day Care

Education, Safety Sacrificed in Fiscal Crunch

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In the [Prince George's County](#) community of Riverdale Park, town officials have noted a distressing sign of the national economic downturn: more children left home alone to fend for themselves by working parents too strapped to afford child care.

The problem was discovered by code enforcement officers who inspect apartments in the town of 7,000. They used to come across such cases once every couple of years. Then, six months ago, they found one child left alone, followed by another and another.

In one instance, a kindergarten-age girl was found hiding in a closet, apparently because she was scared, code enforcement officers said. In another, children aged 10 or 12 were missing school to watch their younger siblings.

Riverdale's experience comes amid an increasing economic strain in child care across the Washington region. In an area known for day-care waiting lists, many operators report a rise in vacancies as parents withdraw their children or cut back on hours because they can no longer afford the cost.

The phenomenon is not universal, but it has struck in many middle- and working-class areas as lost jobs, reduced work schedules and foreclosed homes affect families with few reserves. Many have confronted tough choices about the care of their children.

"I've never seen anything like this before," said Phyllis Waters, president of the Professional Child Care Provider Network of Prince George's County. "You're seeing people just dropping out. . . . They're taking them out of day care and putting them into homes with grandmothers and neighbors and whoever else."

There are no statistics on the decline, but Maryland state officials say the economic fallout can be seen in a recent spike in complaints in Prince George's about unregulated, informal day-care providers that operate illegally. In [Montgomery County](#), state officials said, child-care centers that once had waiting lists are reporting vacancies. "We've never seen that trend," said [Rolf Grafwallner](#), assistant state superintendent for the division of early childhood development.

Day-care providers have noted downturns in Dale City, Bowie and Gaithersburg. One District operator whose families rely on child-care subsidies said her parents were unaffected, but a number of families using subsidies in other areas said they had a harder time coming up with their co-payments, which vary according to income. Several child-care centers that serve more affluent families noted little change.

For families with young children, day-care costs can rival a rent or mortgage payment, with an average that can approach almost \$1,000 a month for one infant at a child-care center. But as hard times hit home, advocates and parents worry about what children stand to lose in the scaling back, both in early education and, even more, in safety.

"Our fear is that these children are being put in places where there are literally no safety requirements and no

background screens, and we just don't know what they are being exposed to," said Linda K. Smith, executive director of the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies.

Smith said she does not blame parents for what is "mostly a choice between bad and worse." But she says, "It is terrible in America that there are national policies and state policies that force families into these decisions."

In Annandale, Ana Camacho, a mother of two, said she was waking up three times a night wondering how to make ends meet and care for her children. Her home was in foreclosure. At one point, she even considered the desperate measure of sending her U.S.-born children to live with her mother in Bolivia. "The most important thing is my kids," she said.

In Bladensburg, enrollment at Learning World Child Development Center started to decline noticeably in July, with 20 slots now open and four children leaving this month. "I've never seen a decrease in enrollment this significant," said director Nina Gilchrist.

At Gaithersburg Day Nursery, co-owner Jennifer Bailey said her center had 80 children last year and is down to 40. Its staff has been cut from 17 to nine. One of her classrooms -- closed in the recession of the 1990s -- is shuttered again. "I just keep telling myself: 'We've done it before, and we'll do it again,'" she said.

For home day-care providers, there are similar stories. "We have a lot of providers who have hardly any children or no children," said Ana Hoover, president of the Burke Childcare Connection, who said it has been weeks since she has fielded a call from a parent looking to place a child. "Even the providers who are usually full have openings."

Both in Riverdale Park and elsewhere, child-care and community leaders voice concern about a rise in latchkey children.

"I'm seeing a lot of 9- and 10-year-olds with keys going off to their houses," said Mary Braxton, president of Kid Kare, a family child-care association in [Prince William County](#). "There has been an increase in the last year, and that's scary in and of itself."

Unregulated in-home day care is also a concern. It is cheaper than licensed care in family homes -- about \$85 a week for an infant, compared with \$180 a week -- but isn't subject to the same standards and inspections. "For more families, that's not the route they want to go, but unfortunately that's the route they can afford," Braxton said.

In Riverdale Park, where about half of the housing units are apartments, the accumulation of cases of children home alone became the focus of a town meeting this month that brought together property managers, police, educators and town officials.

One apartment complex manager noted that many of his families rely on construction and landscaping jobs, which have fallen off amid the housing bust. The median rent in the county last year was \$1,057 a month.

"In our small town, when we're seeing more than one case, it's enough for us to sit up and take notice," said Police Chief Teresa Chambers, who counted more than 10 cases in the past six months. Six were discovered by code enforcement officers, who must notify police.

But at the town meeting, leaders looked for ways to help those without child care. There is talk of a community center where children might be cared for, although funding is unclear.

The Rev. Ben Slye, pastor at Christian Life Center in Riverdale Park, said these are desperate times for many families. "We talk about day care, but that's ludicrous when you can't even afford to pay your rent," he said.

Slye recalled stepping forward on behalf of one Riverdale Park family to tell child-welfare investigators: "This is not abuse. This is really the reality of where our economy is right now."

In Maryland, child-welfare officials say the rule of thumb is that children should not be left home alone unless they are 13 or older, but reports of problems are considered on a case-by-case basis. The District leaves the issue up to parental judgment, and Virginia has guidelines that vary by county; in Fairfax, for example, children 11 and 12 may be alone for up to three hours and those 13 to 15 may be unsupervised for longer periods but not overnight.

At child-care centers nationally, enrollments have dropped, too, said Eric Karolak, executive director of the Early Care and Education Consortium. Although the economic picture is different in each community, he said, "some of the stories we are hearing are just heart-wrenching."

They come from parents such as Sonia Castellanos, 40, of Fairfax City, who said that after her husband was laid off from his accounting job, the family gave notice at her 4-year-old daughter's child-care center. The girl was so excited about holiday festivities underway at the center that her parents decided she could stay through Santa's visit.

The child-care program is especially important, Castellanos said, because her daughter is part of a Spanish-speaking family and benefits from English-language instruction. "It's going to be a sacrifice for us," Castellanos said. But, she added: "We don't have much choice. We're just hoping my husband gets a new job soon."

Christine Menton, 39, mother of a 5-year-old boy in Fairfax, said that when her family's income dipped with a lost job, she rearranged child care. Now a neighbor meets her son at the bus stop and watches him until she comes home. "I just hope we can afford camp this summer," she said.

Michelle Morgan, 30, a Bladensburg mother of four who worked in the mortgage industry, took her children out of child care when she was laid off in 2007. Now she has a job as a temp, but her salary is lower. She says she could not get by without child-care subsidies. The cost for her infant's care is almost \$200 a week, and it costs an additional \$95 a week each for care before and after school for her older children, ages 8, 10 and 12.

The monthly total: \$1,920.

"I feel like the economy is horrible," Morgan said. "The rent is going up, and the pay is going down and day care is not getting cheaper." The way she figures it, "I would not be able to pay my rent if I paid [the full cost] for day care."

In many areas, struggling families make use of child-care subsidies, but some find it hard to afford their co-pay, said Judy Falkenrath, director of Annandale Christian Community for Action Child Development Center. At ACCA, all or part of the infant-toddler center might be closed next fiscal year because of declining enrollment and lost grants.

With these kinds of realities more common, Debra Walker, a family day-care provider in Bowie, said that two caregivers in her area have closed for lack of children and that she's surprised at how many families have had to give up formal child care. "You know they have to work, and they need child care in order to work, so I didn't think it would be affected so quickly," she said.

In Accokeek, Sherry Waters, a licensed family day-care provider for 15 years, went so far as to apply for a second job to work on weekends, at Target, Walmart, a greeting card shop.

She did this only after trying hard to rebuild her enrollment. She advertised. Extended her hours. Cut her fees. "I have never had a problem," she said. "This is the first time."

Six weeks later, she has not landed a weekend job. And her husband's work hours, as a fleet mechanic for a construction-related company, have been cut back, too.

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